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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000763

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SUBJECT: AFTER THE AWAKENING: TRIBES AS GOVERNMENT IN
ANBAR?

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[B](#). 08 BAGHDAD 03928

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Classified By: Deputy Polcouns John G. Fox, reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Sahwa's success at helping beat back Al-Qaida and associated extremists led to its first-place finish in Anbar Province's January provincial election. Winners now move, amid high expectations, from electoral victory into governing. Fallujah-area tribal sheikhs, including the province's top vote-getter, say they will use their victory to improve services and infrastructure. This sheikh bluntly stated that the formerly politically dominant Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) would not be welcomed into any provincial governing coalition. More senior Fallujah sheikhs, however, said they did not want Sahwa to dominate the provincial government. One prominent senior sheikh proudly displayed a picture of Vice President Tariq Al-Hashimi (of the IIP) in his tribal gathering room.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY (cont'd): Fallujah's local IIP representative refused to speculate about an eventual governing coalition, but stressed that the "Awakening" in Anbar had included elements of society beyond tribes and that it had begun well before the U.S. troop surge in Iraq. He said all sides in Anbar, so far, had agreed "to talk, and not to fight" following the election. Given Sahwa's first-place finish, Ramadi-based Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha is a power-broker in filling new leadership slots. Another prominent Anbar sheikh vaguely suggested that recent sensitive discussions in Baghdad between Sahwa members and PM Maliki might lead to a new and "surprising" national-level coalition after parliamentary elections. END SUMMARY.

SAHWA: BEATING BACK AL-QAIDA FIRST
-- "NOW WE ARE POLITICAL"

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Iraq Awakening Conference, or Muatammar Sahwat Al-Iraq (MSI), was the first-place winner in Anbar's Provincial Council (PC) election in January, taking some 20 percent of the popular vote. Sahwa, as it is known, is expected to get eight seats on Anbar's 29-seat council. Over the past several weeks, MSI president Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha has been active in holding behind-the-scenes talks with other local power-brokers on nominating people to assume Anbar's key leadership positions. Sheikh Ahmed has led MSI since the

assassination in 2007 of his younger brother, Sheikh Sattar, who founded the original Awakening as a security organization to expel Al-Qaida from Ramadi. Ahmed later transformed the Awakening into a political party. His grip on his party's leadership has long been the subject of speculation (reftels). Misgivings within tribal ranks about the Awakening's future and MSI's ability to govern were aired to Embassy Poloff during a recent visit to Fallujah.

14. (SBU) Sahwa's electoral success is noteworthy for the degree to which tribal leaders' campaign promises translated into votes. The Awakening coalition is not uniform, but comprised of parts of the broader Sunni Arab population. It is the largest tribal-oriented party, but there are others (Hamid Al Heiss's and Ali Hatem's Iraqi Tribal Front, for example). Since the election, some fissures have developed within Sahwa. The extent to which Sheikh Ahmed and other Qwithin Sahwa. The extent to which Sheikh Ahmed and other tribal leaders can succeed in governing is what Anbaris and other parts of Iraq will be watching closely in coming months.

15. (C) In Fallujah, top vote-winner Sheikh Aifan al-Issawi (a darkly charismatic 30-something and mostly-fluent English speaker with family ties in Saudi Arabia) provided a candid assessment of this emerging tribal political scene in Anbar. As a major Sahwa leader, he has benefited from close ties to the Marines (via SOI payments); his \$400,000 armored BMW sits alongside a large purple and black rock star-like concert tour bus currently being renovated (and armored) in his extensive compound on the outskirts of Fallujah. Aifan told Poloff that, even though he received the most votes in Anbar, he did not want to be governor -- instead, he would take a seat on the PC "because governors come and go." (NOTE: A host of past Anbar governors has been assassinated or intimidated to the point of leaving the province altogether.

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Two new candidates for governor have recently emerged. END NOTE.) He said outgoing Anbar governor Ma'moun could "sit alongside" Sahwa members, but "corrupt" IIP officials would be effectively shut out of decision-making.

16. (C) Sheikh Aifan, who had been targeted at his compound by a suicide-bomber the week before, said bluntly that "the Awakening is over" and added that "we woke up after they killed our families, but now we are political." Another close Fallujah contact characterized Sahwa as "revenge-takers -- and not much more than that." (NOTE: The first 30 minutes of the conversation centered on Aifan's insistence that the young suicide-bomber who had unsuccessfully targeted him could not have been a member of his tribe because his remains included a hairy leg and long straight hair; these were physical traits, he stressed, that did not match those of his close-knit tribe's. The Marines have so far been unable to trace the bomber's fingerprints, from the fingers which Aifan had provided them after the bomber blew himself up inside the compound's W.C., killing a young family guard. Both Aifan and older Albu Issa sheikhs expressed concerns about detainees being released who were not welcomed back into the tribes; their only recourse, they said, was to become suicide-bombers. Several recently released detainees have been killed in the Haditha region after returning home, allegedly by local Iraqi Police seeking revenge. Aifan said the bomber's "pale skin" likely meant he'd been in detention at a U.S. facility such as Bucca and only recently released. END NOTE.)

GOOD AT FIGHTING, BUT
WHAT ABOUT GOVERNING?

17. (C) Sheikh Aifan expressed optimism that a Sahwa-led coalition in Ramadi could attract regional investors, which he said past IIP leaders had failed to do. He acknowledged likely budget shortfalls for the province due to lower

national oil revenue, but was confident (perhaps overly so) that Anbar's tribes would be able to keep all their promises to the people. IIP's past failures, Aifan added, meant the party should be excluded from any new decision-making coalition in Anbar, a comment echoed by a young Fallujah lawyer whose father had won a new (non-Sahwa) seat on the provincial body. Aifan claimed he had recently met with PM Maliki, who had promised close attention to Anbar's rebuilding needs -- and who had suggested that end-of-year parliamentary elections would lead to a new and "surprising" national coalition. While Aifan would not go into detail regarding his "sensitive" discussion with PM Maliki, he did suggest that there might be more active behind-the-scenes reconciliation under way between the Anbar tribal movement that he represents and the central government. Aifan predicted that Maliki and associated candidates would win national parliamentary elections. NOTE: The sheikhs' opinions of the continued presence or withdrawal of U.S. Marines in Anbar, alongside other Anbaris' views, will be reported septel. END NOTE.

18. (C) Internal splits within Sahwa and concerns about their governing potential were evident in lengthy lunch and dinner conversations in Fallujah. Sheikh Khamis al-Issawi, echoed Qconversations in Fallujah. Sheikh Khamis al-Issawi, echoed by another prominent relative and Fallujah City Council member (Sheikh Talib), said that Awakening PC members should not control Anbar -- "this would not be good for the province." Another senior sheikh added that "you do not have to be gray in the hair to be wise" -- a sarcastic swipe at the younger Aifan. In a sign of changing times, Khamis excused himself from the lunch gathering with Poloff and a Marine general and battalion commanders in order to meet with DPM Rafe al Issawi, a native of Fallujah. (Past standard "protocol" among tribes viewed all Marine generals as paramount points of contact, symbolic of the de facto status the U.S. Marine Corps has assumed since arrival in Iraq's western province: that of strongest and most well-armed tribe -- to say nothing of their sizable discretionary CERP funds.)

IIP: WE SACRIFICED, AND FOUGHT, TOO;
TRIBES INTO GOVERNMENT WILL TEST ALL

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19. (C) In a detailed exchange at a Marine base near Fallujah, the IIP's main representative, Sheikh Khalid al'Ubaydi (aka Abu Mujahid), told Poloff and Marine battalion leaders that post-election politicking in Anbar had avoided overt violence, though inter-party suspicions remained high. He said the IIP had previously felt "a big gap" with Marines in Anbar, but the situation had improved. (NOTE: Some Fallujah contacts report that naturally close Awakening ties -- on top of significant CERP payments for SOI salaries -- between Marine units and Anbar's tribes had led some residents to believe the U.S. had picked sides -- tribes over IIP -- in Anbar politics. These concerns appear to have lessened, and it was evident that the IIP representative welcomed continued meetings with Poloff and Marines. END NOTE.)

110. (C) The IIP's Abu Muhahid described improved security in the Fallujah area, but also voiced concerns about a still-active tribal support council in the Karmah area that did not fall under the Iraqi Security Forces. Better policing had reduced the need for Sahwa-based security, he said, while adding that Sahwa members "are part of our families, we were in school with them." The IIP in Anbar accepted the election results, Abu Mujahid said, despite lacking the "talents of democracy and its tradition of not fighting." He said PM Maliki was "getting stronger and stronger" but that Anbaris hoped he would not become a "political fanatic."

¶11. (C) Abu Mujahid, in a set of pointed comments, emphasized that Anbar's current security had resulted from many Anbaris, not just Sahwa members, working collectively to root out terrorists. He recounted the evolution of the turn-around, which began in early 2006, remarking, "the people here fought Al Qaida before Sahwa and before more U.S. troops arrived; this is a fact and we must acknowledge it." Abu Mujahid believes that credit principally belongs to city leaders (many later assassinated), IP, IA and Sahwa (he did not cite U.S. troops' contributions). Now that Sahwa had won an election, it would be held accountable for better services and sustained security, tasks he said no one had found easy to accomplish since the U.S. invasion and subsequent eruptions of sectarianism and terrorism in Iraq. (NOTE: Fallujah has traditionally been an IIP power base in the province, so friction between the party and Sahwa is most prominent there. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The political transition in Anbar remains delicate. Sahwa - IIP relations will likely continue to be tense. Internal splits, such as those exemplified in the Fallujah area between Sheikh Aifan and other, older tribal leaders, could complicate the shift from fighting to governing. The older sheikhs seem wary of too rapid an assumption of tribal power, or a lack of a diverse coalition, and so are concerned about Sheikh Aifan's apparent intention to marginalize the IIP at the expense of the tribes.

¶13. (C) Sheikh Aifan said that he would lead a provincial security committee in Anbar, voluntarily pulling himself out of an overt political role, for now. His comments also need to be viewed in the light of current divisions and Qto be viewed in the light of current divisions and politicking within the overall Sahwa bloc; his is one voice, albeit an important one, among several. PM Maliki might be positioned to win more -- and more long-term -- friends in Anbar, especially if resources flow from Baghdad despite lower oil revenue and if SOI are successfully integrated into the ISF (a big if). The PM's characterization to us privately, however, of the western province as a "hot spot" in need of a sustained U.S. military presence probably more accurately reveals his continued concerns about possible Anbar-based Sunni Arab (read: ex-Baathist) machinations -- and their capabilities.
BUTENIS